

OPEN AND SHUT?

Saturday, February 06, 2016

The OA Interviews: Kamila Markram, CEO and Co-Founder of Frontiers

Based in Switzerland, the open access publisher **Frontiers** was founded in 2007 by Kamila and Henry Markram, who are both neuroscientists at the **Swiss Federal Institute of Technology in Lausanne**. Henry Markram is also director of the **Human Brain Project**.

A researcher-led initiative envisaged as being “by scientists, for scientists” the mission of Frontiers was to create a “community-oriented open access scholarly publisher and social networking platform for researchers.”

To this end, Frontiers has been innovative in a number of ways, most notably with its “collaborative peer review process”. This abjures the traditional hierarchical approach to editorial decisions in favour of reaching “consensual” outcomes. In addition, papers are judged in an “impact-neutral” way: while expected to meet an objective threshold before being publicly validated as a correct scientific contribution, their significance and impact are not assessed.

Frontiers has also experimented with a variety of novel publication formats, created Loop – a “research network” intended to foster and support open science – and pioneered altmetrics before the term had been coined.

Two other important components of the Frontiers’ concept were that it would operate on a non-profit basis (via the Frontiers Research Foundation), and that while it would initially levy article-processing charges (APCs) for publishing papers, this would subsequently be replaced by a sponsored funding model.

This latter goal has yet to be realised. “We dreamed of a zero-cost model, which was probably too idealistic and it was obviously not possible to start that way”, says Kamila Markram below.

Frontiers also quickly concluded that its non-profit status would not allow it to achieve its goals. “We realised early on that we would need more funds to make the vision sustainable and it would not be possible to secure these funds through purely philanthropic means,” explains Markram.

Consequently, in 2008 Frontiers reinvented itself as a for-profit publisher called Frontiers Media SA. It also began looking for additional sources of revenue, including patent royalties – seeking, for instance, to patent its peer review process by means of a **controversial business method patent**.

The patent strategy was also short-lived. “We abandoned the patent application by not taking any action by the specific deadline given by the patent office and deliberately let it die,” says Markram, adding, “we soon



Kamila Markram

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HEFCE Frontiers

realised that it is far better just to keep innovating than waste one's time on a patent." (Henry Markram nevertheless remains an active patent applicant).

By the time the peer review patent had died it was in any case apparent that Frontiers' pay-to-publish model was working well. In fact, business was booming, and to date Frontiers has published around 41,000 papers by 120,000 authors. It has also recruited 59,000 editors, and currently publishes 54 journals. By 2011 the company had turned "cash positive" (five years after it was founded).

Successes not unnoticed

Frontier's successes did not go unnoticed. Not only did it quickly gain mindshare amongst researchers, but it began to attract the attention of publishers, not least Nature Publishing Group (NPG), which in February 2013 announced that was entering into a relationship with Frontiers.

The exact nature of this relationship was, however, somewhat elusive. In its press release *Nature* described it as a "strategic alliance". An associated news item in *Nature* reported that Frontiers had been "snapped up" by NPG, which was taking a "majority investment" in the company.

A post on the Frontiers web site also talked of NPG taking a "majority investment", and quoted an approving Philip Campbell (*Nature's* Editor-in-Chief) saying, "Frontiers is innovating in many ways that are of interest to us and to the scientific community".

In reality it was Holtzbrinck Publishing Group that had invested in Frontiers, not NPG, although Holtzbrinck was the owner of Macmillan Science and Education (and thus of NPG).

It was also unclear as to whether the money that Holtzbrinck had invested in Frontiers could be described as a "majority investment". Speaking to Science in 2015, Frontier's Executive Editor Frederick Fenter described it rather as a "minority share".

Either way, the precarious nature of Frontier's relationship with *Nature* became all too evident in January 2015, when it was announced that Macmillan Science and Education (along with NPG) was merging with German science publisher Springer. There was no mention of Frontiers, and the situation was only clarified when Macmillan posted a tweet in response to the enquiries it was receiving about the status of Frontiers.

Looking back, it would appear the much-lauded relationship between NPG and Frontiers was more wish fulfilment than substance – encapsulated perhaps by a glossy 7-minute video produced at the time that (amongst other things) includes a clip of the CEO of Macmillan Science and Education (and former MD of NPG) Annette Thomas welcoming Frontiers to Macmillan's office in London, lauding its achievements and promise, but failing to specify what exactly *Nature* planned to do with Frontiers.

The true state of affairs does not appear to have been publicly acknowledged until the 2015 Science article cited above. When asked to clarify the situation Fenter replied: "We made the decision about 6 months ago to make a clean separation and never to mention again that [NPG] has some kind of involvement in Frontiers."

Critics

Like most successful open access publishers Frontiers has attracted controversy along the way. There have been complaints, for instance, about its peer review process (including an oft-repeated claim that its editorial

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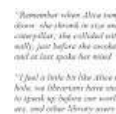


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system does not allow papers to be rejected), complaints about the level of “spam” it bombards researchers with, and complaints that its [mode of operating](#) is inappropriately similar to the one used by multi-level marketing company [Amway](#). (By, for instance, requiring editors to recruit further editors within a pyramidal editorial and journal structure, setting editors targets for the number of papers they have to publish in their journal each year, and requiring that they themselves publish in the journal).

There have also been complaints about the way that Frontiers promotes itself on its blog. Its posts have attracted considerable attention (including from high-profile media outlets like the *Times Higher*) but critics argue that while its contributions tend to be presented as research the data is cherry-picked in a self-serving way. See, for instance, [here](#), [here](#), [here](#), [here](#), and [here](#).

In addition, Frontiers has attracted criticism for publishing a number of controversial papers (see [here](#) and [here](#) for instance), and in 2014 it was accused of caving in to specious libel threats by [retracting a legitimate paper](#). The latter led to Frontiers’ associate editor Björn Brembs publicly [resigning](#).

A number of other prominent researchers have publicly criticised Frontiers too. In June, for instance, a [blog critique](#) was posted by Dorothy Bishop, Professor of Developmental Neuropsychology at the University of Oxford, and [another one](#) a month later by Melissa Terras, Professor of Digital Humanities in the Department of Information Studies at University College London (UCL).

More recently, in January, Micah Allen, a Cognitive neuroscientist at UCL, rehearsed the various complaints against Frontiers in a [blog post](#) entitled “Is Frontiers in Trouble”.

But the most controversial incident occurred last May, when Frontiers [sacked 31 editors](#) amid a row over independence. The editors complained that Frontiers’ publication practices are designed to maximise the company’s profits, not the quality of papers, and that this could harm patients.

The wave of criticism reached a peak last October when Jeffrey Beall [added](#) Frontiers to his [list](#) of “potential, possible, or probable predatory scholarly open-access publishers”.

Supporters

On the other hand, Frontiers has no shortage of fans and supporters, not least amongst its army of editors and authors. It has also received public support from a number of industry organisations.

In a [statement](#) posted on its web site last year, for instance, the Committee on Publication Ethics (COPE) said, “We note that there have been vigorous discussions about, and some editors are uncomfortable with, the editorial processes at Frontiers. However, the processes are declared clearly on the publisher’s site and we do not believe there is any attempt to deceive either editors or authors about these processes. Publishing is evolving rapidly and new models are being tried out. At this point we have no concerns about Frontiers being a COPE member and are happy to work with them as they explore these new models.”

And in response to [questions being asked](#) about the role that Frontiers’ journal manager Mirjam Curno plays at COPE the statement added, “Frontiers has been a member of COPE since January 2015. In the interests of complete transparency, we note here also that one of the Frontiers staff, Mirjam Curno, is a member of COPE council – a position she was elected to when she was employed at the *Journal of the*

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International AIDS Society in 2012 and which continued (with the agreement of the COPE Council and on becoming an Associate Member of COPE) after she moved to Frontiers; she is now also a trustee of COPE.”

Around the same time the Open Access Scholarly Publishers Association (OASPA) published [this comment](#): “We are aware that concerns have recently been expressed about the publisher Frontiers, which is a member of OASPA. We have discussed the situation with Frontiers, who have been very responsive in providing us with information on their editorial processes and explaining their procedures. In light of these responses, the Membership Committee remains fully satisfied that Frontiers meets the requirements for membership of OASPA.”

(We could note in passing that Frontiers’ Executive Editor Frederick Fenter was a [candidate](#) for OASPA’s Board in 2015).

As will perhaps be evident, a central focus for the complaints about Frontiers are its editorial processes, including the claim that its online system does not allow papers to be rejected. Markram agrees that there has been some confusion over this. While insisting that reviewers have always been able to reject papers, she acknowledges below that feedback indicated “it was not clear to them how to recommend a manuscript for rejection to the handling Editor.”

This issue, she says, has now been addressed. “Based on the feedback we have now renamed this option *withdraw from review/recommend rejection*, and the reasons, which reviewers can choose from to indicate why, have also been split accordingly.”

Daniel Lakens, an assistant professor at Eindhoven University of Technology, has experienced Frontiers as author, reviewer and editor. He has published several papers, and was for two years an associate editor for *Frontiers in Cognition*, resigning last month due to a lack of time. He continues to act as a reviewer.

Lakens suspects that much of the criticism comes from researchers who have failed to understand, or are not comfortable with, Frontiers’ distinctive peer review process.

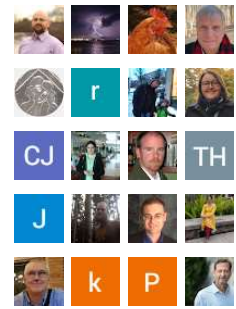
“The review process itself is much more collaborative. This is a good thing if you find good reviewers willing to invest time in improving manuscripts. Forcing scientist to enter a discussion, and respond to arguments from the other side, leads to bigger improvements in manuscripts than at traditional journals, in my opinion. But it really depends on the mind-set of the reviewers and authors.”

The other important difference, he says, is Frontiers’ commitment to publishing methodologically sound research, regardless of significance levels or novelty.

“Publication bias is probably the biggest challenge that modern science faces. I think it is important that Frontiers takes a responsibility in publishing all sound research. Some reviewers, more used to traditional journals, just want to reject papers they don’t like. For example, this happened when I submitted my [own article](#) to Frontiers, where a reviewer thought there was nothing novel in my explanation of effect sizes, and withdrew from the revision process. It would have been better if this reviewer had instead provided some suggestions to improve it (which was no doubt possible), because the rather substantial interest in the article (it has been cited 200+ times) suggests his judgment about the novelty of the paper seems to have been irrelevant.”

Lakens is also sceptical about claims that it is not possible to reject papers. “Every manuscript I wanted to reject as a Frontiers editor has been

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rejected.”

Radical when it started

Lakens adds: “Frontiers was radical when it started and paved the way for even more radical open access journals. The collaborative review process is still in many ways novel and, very often, an improvement over the traditional peer review process. But now we see even more innovative journals than Frontiers emerging. One example is *PeerJ*, which greatly reduces the cost of open access publishing, and also embraces open reviews.”

In truth, impact-neutral reviewing was **pioneered** by *PLOS ONE* in 2006, a year before Frontiers appeared on the scene. But implicit in Lakens’ statement, I think, is a belief that while it has played an important part in promoting new types of peer review, Frontiers now faces competition from younger, more innovative, and less expensive publishers like *PeerJ* and *F1000Research*.

It clearly will not help that Beall has added Frontiers to his list, which Lakens believes could encourage researchers to shun the publisher. “Many scientists are sensitive to prestige, and if these researchers would not be able to evaluate the quality of science themselves, they might think twice about submitting to Frontiers, although I would hope this group is rather small.”

Beall, of course, is himself a controversial figure, and his list is widely criticised by open access advocates. “I think Beall’s list is not transparent,” says Lakens. “Inclusions are not justified, and occur on the basis of the personal opinion of a single individual. The scientific community should ignore Beall’s list, and pay more attention to the **Directory of Open Access Journals** (although no list will be perfect). I think Frontiers should take valid criticisms seriously, because in science, there is always room for improvement, but I don’t think Beall’s list falls on the category of ‘valid criticism’.”

It is indeed remarkable that the decisions of a lone librarian sitting in a Colorado library could have a significant (and global) impact on a publisher. Only too aware of this, in December Frontiers **dispatched** Fenter and Curno to Colorado to meet with Beall and try and persuade him to take Frontiers back off his list – apparently without success.

Underlying all this, of course, is the fact that the emergence of the Internet has triggered manifold controversies within the research community. Above all, it has plunged scholarly communication into a period of considerable upheaval, and put inherited ways of doing things under growing pressure, not least traditional peer review. The cost of publishing research papers is a further source of often bitter disagreement – and open access publishing has amplified both issues.

A key question here seems to be how publishers find an appropriate role for themselves in the emerging new landscape. In the Q&A below Markram says that “dumping all content on the Internet, unchecked, in multiple versions of readiness, and as cheaply as possible, is not a service to anyone”.

Many, if not most, would doubtless agree with this, which would seem to imply a continuing gatekeeping role for publishers. But who these publishers should be, exactly what kind of service they should provide, and what they should charge for that service remains unresolved.

On the issue of costs, Markram asserts that under the traditional subscription system it costs \$7,000 to publish an article, a figure she says

that OA publishers have reduced to around \$2,000, and Frontiers to just \$1,100.

I am sure many would challenge these figures, but I will finish with two (rhetorical) questions: First (leaving aside the issue of whether pedestrian papers written solely in order to bulk up CVs should in fact be formally published), if the average rejection rate at Frontiers is (as Markram says below) just 19% (i.e. 81% are accepted), and if some of those articles turn out not even to have met Frontiers' lower threshold for publication (As Markram points it, "no peer-review is bullet-proof, so problematic articles regrettably do sometimes get through) then does \$1,100 (or \$2,000) per paper represent good value for money? Second, how high does the acceptance rate need to go before simply dumping papers on the Internet becomes a logical way for the research community to save itself millions of dollars a year?

To read Markram's detailed answers please click on the link below. These are in a pdf file preceded by this introduction.

Readers should be aware that the Q&A is long. I have chosen not to edit Kamila Markram's text and there are some repetitions, but I was keen to allow her to address my questions in her own words, and as fully as she felt to be appropriate. I have, however, made ample use of pull-quotes.

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Posted by Richard Poynder at [15:05](#)



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